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SECTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE MOSSI PEOPLE*

By Elliott Percival Skinner**

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121 The African Sudanic states were the subject of a discussion presented before The New York Academy of Sciences in 1949. At that time Joseph Greenberg discussed the rise of these states and evaluated the theories assigning the predominant part in their formation to Caucasian influences. However, the Negro genesis of the Mossi Sudanic state never has been seriously questioned.[1] In this paper I propose to analyze the political system of the Mossi in the light of such questions as: the power structure of the African state; the conquest theory of state formation; and the presence of feudalism or feudal-type states in the Sudan.

105 The one and one-half million Mossi represent the largest population aggregate in what is now known as French West Africa. They inhabit an arid 125,000 square miles of sub-Saharan area drained by the Black, Red, and White Voltas and their tributaries. The Mossi are described physically as "true" Negroes as distinguished from the other Sudanic types. Their language belongs to the Mossi-Grunshi groups of the Niger-Congo family of African languages. In many respects their culture is similar to those of such Voltaic groups as the Tallensi, Dagomba, and Mamprussi peoples of the Northern Gold Coast (Ghana). The people in this Voltaic region are mainly agriculturalists who grow several varieties of millet and sorghum. They rear some cattle, sheep, and goats, but do little fishing or hunting. Their kinship systems are based on patrilineal segmented lineages. Throughout this entire region we find the institution of earth priests who are ritual owners of the land, but political organization is highly segmented and acephalous, with the exception of the centrally organized systems of the Dagomba, Mossi, and Mamprussi.

175 The *Tarikh es Soudan*, a chronicle written by Es Sadi, who lived in Timbuktu during the early seventeenth century, records that the Mossi first appeared on the historical scene about 1328. Between the years 1328 and 1477 the Mossi of the northern kingdom of Yatenga attacked and conquered Timbuktu, sacked Macina, and raided the towns of Bagana and Walata held by the Songhoi. In turn they were defeated by Sonni-Ali, the famous Songhoi ruler, who even invaded their territory, capturing slaves and booty. Askia El Hadj Mohamed, ruler of the Songhoi, raised a holy war

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against the Mossi in 1497 and defeated them, but he failed to make them embrace Islam. The Mossi and Songhoi fought several other wars until Songhoi power was broken by the Moroccans, who captured Timbuktu in 1590.[2]

The Mossi first came to the attention of the Europeans during the travels of Heinrich Barth, J. Dupuis, and Edward Bowdich, but the first European, G. A. Krause, did not enter Mossi country until 1888. Krause was followed six months later by Louis G. Binger, but the Mossi became suspicious and closed their territory to other Europeans. About 1894, one Ferguson, a British mulatto, safely arrived at Ouagadougou, the Mossi capital, and signed a treaty with the supreme Mossi ruler placing the area under British protection. The French arrived in the country in September 1896 and, refusing to honor the British treaty, conquered the Mossi and secured control of the country.

The Mossi traditional history goes back to about the eleventh century and is part of a tradition relating the origin of the Dagomba, Mamprussi, and Mossi peoples. The Mossi claim descent from Nyennega, the daughter of a Dagomba ruler, who fled from her father's home to marry a hunter by the name of Riallé. This man had left his father's country and was living in exile as a result of a quarrel over the chieftainship. The product of the union between Riallé and Nyennega was a son called Wedraogo in honor of the stallion that carried his mother to the north. At the age of fifteen the boy Wedraogo went back to the Dagomba to visit his grandfather and was given 4 horses and 50 cows. According to tradition, when Wedraogo left the Dagomba country to return north many Dagomba horsemen followed him, because their country was overcrowded. Wedraogo and his followers rode northward and conquered his father's people, the Boussansi, and decided to live in a place called Tankúrn (Tengdodogo—old country). Here Wedraogo married a Boussansi woman called Pouiriketa, who bore him three sons. Diaba Lompo, the eldest, was sent out to rule Fada N'Gourma; another, called Rawa, was sent to rule a place called Zondema (now part of Yatenga); the youngest, Zoungrana, remained with his father at Tengkodogo.

Tradition states that the Boussansi were only one of a group of small but warlike peoples who inhabited this region. The others were the Ninisis, the Kibissi, and the Gourounsi. These groups were constantly at war with one another and they made frequent alliances with stronger peoples to fight their enemies. A Ninisi chief visited Tengkodogo and, seeing the strength of the Dagomba, sought an alliance with Wedraogo. The Ninisi chief sent Wedraogo a woman called Pouitenga as a wife for Zoungrana, Wedraogo's son. A few years later the Ninisi asked Wedraogo to come and rule their country, but he died at a place called Sagabtenga before he could establish complete control of their territory. Zoungrana succeeded his father as head of the Mossi (a new tribe resulting from the union of the Dagomba and the local inhabitants) but, wishing to remain at Tengkodogo, he sent his son Oubri to complete the conquest of the

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173 country. The Ninisi were happy to have Oubri as their sovereign since he was related to them through his mother. Oubri made war on the local inhabitants and subjugated or drove away those Ninisi, Kibissi, and Gourounsi who did not accept his rule.

Naba Oubri is regarded as the founder of the Ouagadougou dynasty, the most important of the dynasties issuing from the original Dagomba conquerer, Wedraogo. The Mossi rulers who succeeded him spent most of their lives subjugating the rest of the country; the sites of their graves are markers along the road of Mossi conquests. It was only after the reign of Naba Coibga, the fourteenth ruler, that the Mossi rulers were able to confine their activities to the capital at Ouagadougou. By the reign of Naba Warga, the twentieth ruler, ritual prevented the leader from leaving his capital. The country had become so centralized at this time that it was feared that civil strife would erupt if the sovereign left his capital.

The consolidation of the Mossi state seemed to have been a difficult task, and at various periods in its history some decentralization took place. During the reign of Komdimie, the fifth ruler, two of his relatives broke away from his control and formed principalities. The northern kingdom of Yatenga was created by a man called Yadiga, and the state of Riziam was founded by Kouda. Despite opposition and constant attacks by Komdimie the new states remained independent and Yatenga absorbed Zondema, the fief of Wedraogo's son. At this same period Komdimie allegedly gave the provinces of Boussouma, Yako, Conquisitenga, and La to his sons, who called themselves Dima, meaning "Submit only to God." Another province called Kayao broke away from Komdimie's control, and its sovereign took the title of Dima when the supreme ruler was unable to conquer him. Most of the Dimas established courts similar to that of the supreme ruler and performed similar functions, but they still recognized the supremacy of the Ouagadougou dynasty. Besides these small independent states ruled by the Dimas, there were the important independent entities of Tengkodogo, Fada N'Gourma, and Yatenga. The first two claimed independence from Ouagadougou because they were founded by the sons of Wedraogo, while Yatenga claimed independence by the right of revolt and by the subsequent absorption of Zondema. The rulers of these states were forbidden to see each other, or to see the Ouagadougou ruler on pain of death inflicted by their ancestors.

The traditions that describe how the Mossi rulers subjugated and controlled the country differ little from region to region. As the rulers conquered new areas they sent their sons, in company with the sons of their ministers, to command the new districts. When the country was finally conquered the new rulers sent their sons to rule districts taken away from the heirs of former rulers.

The people of Nobéré, the district in which this study was carried out, say that their first sovereign, Biligo, was heir to Oubri, but that he did not wish to rule over the Mossi. Biligo left Ouagadougou on a hunting expedi-

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tion and, when he arrived at the sparsely settled Ninisi village of Nobéré, 173
he decided to stay and make it his home. The Ninisi ran away when they saw Biligo coming, but he persuaded them to return and live in peace under his command. The Tengsoba, or earth priest, of the village refused to return, and Biligo went into the bush and captured him so that the sacrifices to the earth shrines could continue as before. Biligo married a local woman and, when she bore him sons, he sent them to rule those villages not inhabited by the earth priests. These sons and their families formed the noble classes in the district.

About one hundred years ago a district chief called Peka supported the 173
loser in a fight for the supreme chieftainship and was killed when the 565
victorious pretender was installed as chief in Ouagadougou. The victor 631
sent his son, Ngado, to rule over Nobéré and, although the relatives of Peka were scattered, the village chiefs were allowed to retain their posts. These chiefs did lose their noble status, however, because Ngado's sons who went to live in the villages formed the new nobility. The chiefs and their families were submerged into the commoner class. The history of Nobéré is typical of that of most of the Mossi districts and, today, one finds the remnants of many former ruling lineages scattered around the country.

The supreme ruler of the Mossi was called the Moro-naba. He possessed 643
the *nam* which is the symbol of power, and because of this power he had the right of life and death over all his subjects. He also had a religious role in the country because it was his duty to initiate the yearly rites dedicated to the ancestors so that the country would have good crops, and so that the people would be happy and multiply. The Moro-naba was aided in [645]
his rule over the Mossi by five ministers who were responsible for the five provinces grouping 333 villages that made up the territory of the state. These ministers were responsible for the proper administration of the state, and they nominally elected the new Moro-naba.

As soon as the death of the ruler was announced, civil disorder broke out throughout the country and continued until the five ministers and the minister for war took fictive control of the country. When the funeral of the late chief was completed the chief minister, the Ouidi-naba, summoned the lesser ministers to a conference and told them that the country had no chief "because the fire had gone out" and that it now required one. He advised them to consider the qualifications of the late chief's son and of all the other pretenders, and to choose the most worthy individual. The lesser ministers refused to do this, saying: "You are our superior, and the right to make the choice rests on you alone."

The eldest son of the former ruler was usually elected Moro-naba but, as any member of the royal lineage up to the third degree was eligible, many persons tried to bribe the elector. When the Ouidi-naba made his choice he told the minister of war: "My mind is not at ease because I fear that those whose hopes have not been fulfilled will resort to violence."

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643 The war minister replied, "That will be against tradition and justice to the dead ruler. Do not fear; I am here with my arms to see that your decision is respected" (this was not always an empty gesture, for one man, Wobogo, forced a Ouidi-naba to elect him).[3] When the lesser ministers were notified as to the choice of the new sovereign they said: "You have expressed our will and the will of all the people." The elector then secretly called the new ruler and, taking off the man's goat's skin (the symbol of those seeking the chieftainship) told him: "I am giving you the house of your father and of your grandfather." Then the ministers and the chief musician escorted the new ruler before his subjects, and the Ouidi-naba shouted: "Here is he who has the power of life and death over you." The following day all the members of the ruling lineage and sublineages swore not to betray their new ruler. The minister of war then swore, in the name of all the people, to protect the new ruler with his life if the need ever arose. Next followed ceremonies during which a descendant of the original Ninisi inhabitants made sacrifices, in the name of the new sovereign, to his ancient ancestors.

643 642 [778] In analyzing the power of the Moro-naba we must take into consideration the concept of *nam* which is described as "power" or "the force of God." It is this force of God that enables one man to control another, and gives the sovereign the power of life and death over his subjects. Moreover, once a man had "eaten the *nam*," the Mossi constitution had no provisions for deposing him. The Mossi generally claim that only one of their thirty-three rulers was ever deposed, and that he was the ruler who ran away from the French. However, there is another tradition that states that one sovereign, Karfo, was forced to commit suicide by his Ouidi-naba.

According to the Mossi constitution, the Moro-naba had complete control over the lands of the state, and was the only one empowered to distribute these lands as fiefs. Any attack on the lands of the state was an attack on the Moro-naba and thus a cause for war. The Moro-naba alone had the right to make war, and in this he was helped by his vassals, the district chiefs, and their armies. He was court of final appeal for crimes that carried the death penalty and, theoretically, only he had the right to condemn a nobleman to death.

651 686 Every year the district chiefs under the command of their ministers went to the capital to pay allegiance to the Moro-naba with gifts of cows, goats, sheep, cowries, and grain. The animals were presents from the stock of the district chiefs, but the cowries and grain were collected from the villagers of the districts. The people of the several wards in the capital furnished labor for the cultivation of the sovereign's fields and for the upkeep of his houses. The Moro-naba received substantial sums of money from taxes on the sale of slaves or other merchandise in the Ouagadougou market. He also received presents of slaves when his vassals raided the surrounding countries. If a district chief failed to fulfill all of these

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obligations to the Moro-naba, his lands were raided, his women seized and, if he were caught, he was killed.

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It is difficult to ascertain how the institution of provincial administrators arose among the Mossi. Some of the people still believe that the ministers were formerly slaves of the Moro-naba, but Delobsom claims that the first ministers were warrior companions of Naba Oubri, the founder of the Ouagadougou dynasty.[4] These men were not members of the royal lineage and thus were inferior in status to the members of the royal lineage and sublineages under their supervision. However, as emissaries of the Moro-naba, these ministers were entitled to respect by all the people. The ministers recommended successors to vacant district chieftainships; thus it was incumbent upon a district chief to be friendly with his minister if he wished succession to go to his eldest son.

The minister was the person who carried orders from the Moro-naba to the district chiefs, and he reported back to the Moro-naba on conditions in the district he visited. However, the minister could not interfere in the internal affairs of a district, nor could the district chief complain to the Moro-naba about a minister. Everyone was required to observe the strict hierarchy; the only sanction that the district chief exercised over his minister was to appeal to another minister in the hope that the Moro-naba would come to his aid.

The districts that comprised the provinces of the ministers were scattered around the country and were not equal in size or importance. One minister, the Baloum-naba, controlled the districts ruled over by those chiefs who were the sons of recent rulers. Another, the Kamsoro-naba, a eunuch, had control of the largest and wealthiest districts, but he, in contrast to the other ministers, was not succeeded by sons and, when he died, the Moro-naba inherited all of his property. The ministers frequently became very wealthy because they received gifts whenever their charges went to Ouagadougou to pay homage to the ruler. The people from the districts under their control provided labor for their fields and for the upkeep of their houses. The ministers also received bribes from persons seeking vacant district chieftainships.

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When a district chief or Koubéré died, his heirs sent a horse or a sheep with leaves on its tail to notify the ruler of the death. The Moro-naba always questioned the envoys, and when he was satisfied that his men had not met with foul play, he sent the animal to his chief minister. The Moro-naba then sent his own envoys to the late chief's house with offerings for sacrifices to their common ancestors, and also instructed the envoys to collect the death offerings from the chief's relatives. After the funeral the eldest son of the dead chief and the other pretenders went to Ouagadougou bearing gifts to the district minister and the other important men surrounding the ruler. When the time came to name the new district chief, the Moro-naba called his ministers together and asked them: "Which one of the candidates is really capable of succeeding the late chief?"

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635 631 The Ouidi-naba answered: "Naba, you may do as you desire." The ruler then said, "Under these conditions I will designate the eldest son of the late chief as the new Kombéré because his father has never forgotten me, or gave me any trouble when he was alive. It will not be good to reject his son." The ministers then called the heir and put the following question to him three times: "Before his death, did your father designate anyone to replace him as chief?" The heir replied three times: "No! My father did not designate anyone. You may name anyone you wish; even if he is a blind man or a leper." The heir was then given a bonnet, the symbol of [778] the *nam*, and made to swear on drinking the Tibo, a ritual potion, that if he ever betrayed the ruler, may the Tibo kill him. Thereafter, all the members of the new chief's lineage swore to respect and obey him.

635 631 578 The power and function of the Kombéré were similar to those of the Moro-naba, but on a much reduced scale. As the person who had received the *nam* from the Moro-naba, he was supreme in his district, subject only to his obligation to the head ruler. These obligations included the customary gifts and aid in warfare. There is some evidence that many of the Kombérés were lax in paying this tribute and rendering homage to the Moro-naba and consequently were punished or killed. Naba Warga fought a five-year-long civil war against a rebellious vassal before the rebel was killed, and Naba Wobogo was engaged in a three-year civil war with one of his vassals when the French arrived in the country. It is not clear whether the Moro-naba was able to prevent or stop war between his vassals over strayed cattle or stolen women. The Mossi in the district of Nobéré said that the Moro-naba did not often know when neighboring villages were at war. These wars did not involve the loss of territories by the districts, since it was ritually forbidden for one district chief to take lands from another.

631 The district chiefs had ministers who helped them administe the districts. These ministers were descendants of the sons of the Moro-naba's ministers who accompanied the first district chief when he took up his fief. They had control of several villages and they channeled goods and services from the villages to the district heads. The hierarchy of command was also strictly observed on this level, and a village chief who had disputes with other village chiefs, or who had important cases to be judged, was required always to be accompanied by his minister when he [681 visited the district chief. This official could put any man into stocks for serious crimes, but he could authorize the death only of commoners. It 565] must be pointed out, however, that in many cases the district chief usurped the rights of the Moro-naba, and had a troublesome noble secretly strangled. The district chief, like the Moro-naba, could not be deposed; he was often forced to commit suicide or met death by foul play or in open civil war. The people in the district reacted to an unjust ruler by leaving his territories.

The village chiefs held their fiefs directly from the district chiefs, and

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The village chiefs held their fiefs directly from the district chiefs, and
were enfeoffed through the principle of primogeniture on the advice of district chiefs' ministers. They paid homage, and owed fealty, to their district chiefs, although part of their tribute always was sent to the Moro-naba. In the event of war they followed their district chief when he went to serve the Moro-naba. The village chiefs received presents from the heads of the families in the village and settled any local court cases in their villages. They did not have the right, however, either to put men into stocks or to have them executed. They were aided in the administration of the villages by the heads of families.

Almost every Mossi village had sections in which the nobles lived. As stated above, these people were the relatives or descendants of the district heads, and they lived in a semiparasitic condition upon the commoners in the village. Most of them owned horses and, in addition to furnishing the cavalry for the district chief's contingent during war, they raided and attacked caravans passing through the country. The nobles were subject to the control of the village chiefs, and it was not unusual for them to be under the jurisdiction of chiefs who were members of the commoner class. In such cases the district chiefs had a great deal of difficulty resolving the problems between their vassals and their kinsmen. The nobles could steal the wives and daughters of the commoners, but if a commoner tried to steal the wife of a noble he and the woman were both killed. Whenever a noble threatened to disrupt the life of a district he was secretly strangled by the district chief's men.

The above is a brief account of the origin and structure of the Mossi political system. Most of the myths regarding the origin of this system seem to suggest that here is a classic conquest state, but one neither founded by Caucasians nor extraordinarily influenced by them. The Mossi state is homogeneous in race, language, and culture, a feature not found in most of the other Sudanic states. This fact is not interesting in itself until we note that the Mossi share many cultural traits with the Voltaic peoples. Marc believes that this cultural homogeneity is the result of the Mossi invasion of the area during which they imposed their languages and customs on the indigenous populations. Apparently not believing the traditions about the Dagomba origin of the Mossi, he explains the fact that such non-Mossi groups as the Nankana, Wala, and Dagari speak Mossi dialects as proof that the Mossi were politically more powerful in ancient times, but "the feudal regime disappeared little by little.... The Mossi language was kept; [it is] the only actual witness of the ancient power of the Mossi" (author's translation).[5] We know, however, that the Mossi were still encroaching on the territories of their neighbors when the French arrived in 1896.[6]

Rattray believes that the inhabitants of Mamprussi, Dagomba, and Mossi territories are the same now as they were "centuries before the ancestors of those who are now their rulers appeared on the scene."[7] He states that

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631 642 174 114 these conquerors even adopted the language and culture of the indigenous populations, but introduced an "administrative machinery" that welded scattered local groups into loose confederacies without affecting in any great degree the inner life of these groups.[8] Rattray's hypothesis appears to explain quite adequately the reasons for the cultural homogeneity of the Mossi and the other Voltaic peoples. It also conforms to what we know from recent historical times of the organizing and conquering abilities of such figures as Samory and El Hadj Omar. These men carved out veritable empires in this area in remarkably short periods. However, we need not accept Rattray's hypothesis that foreigners were the ones who instituted "administrative machinery" among the Mossi. It is highly possible that the Mossi state might have been the result of internal Voltaic development when one Dagomba lineage established its hegemony over scattered local people in this area. There is some evidence here that the Mossi state had many of the features of the widespread Negro pattern of political structure so common to the other Sudanic states, and this fits in very well with what Professor Greenberg reports about the basic African nature of these states.[9]

631 642 121 171 It is clear that the Mossi state was a complex entity and many persons cannot describe it without calling it feudal.[10] However, the question of feudalism itself is a vexing one, and many scholars limit the use of this term to describe the political system of medieval France and possibly Japan. In fact, not many people would admit the presence of feudal states in Africa although some, such as S. F. Nadel, who worked among the Nupe, call the Sudanic states feudal and talk about fiefs and vassalage. It is now generally agreed that feudalism, despite its other aspects, is basically a form of government. Stephenson gives the classic features of a feudal state as: (1) fief-holding with vassalage; (2) homage and fealty; (3) mutual obligations between lords and vassals; (4) military service from the vassals; (5) inheritance of fiefs by heirs of vassals, usually by primogeniture; (6) subinfeudation; (7) attendance at court; and (8) wardship and marriage arrangements by which fiefs could be held in trust for minors and, in the case of female heirs, husbands who can render homage for them.[11]

An examination of the Mossi political system in terms of the first six characteristics of feudalism shows that this system conforms very well to the specifications for a feudal system. The Mossi did not have an elaborate court structure on the European model and, since only mature males could inherit fiefs, no arrangements for wardships and marriages were necessary. Furthermore, I do not think that these two traits are necessary for feudalism, and they can be considered as cultural content that need not be present in all social processes with similar functions.

Mossi-like societies present a special problem to political theorists because of the importance of kinship in their political systems. Coulborn[12] strongly insists that "A feudal society... is based on contract. It is not

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based on kinship." He contrasts the Geselschaft feudal system with the tribal Gemeinschaft, and recognizes the possible transition from Gemeinschaft relationships to Geselschaft relationships in the evolution of culture. However, this admission places Coulborn on the horns of a dilemma as he does not accept feudalism as a step in the evolution of the state, but as a form of government that develops after the breakdown of a state and is used for state restoration. He states that "The place of feudalism in the rise of civilized societies is not yet complete, but we must pause to notice the profound importance of the substitution of something different for kinship relations."[13] We see from the Mossi data that they used kin bonds instead of warrior-band bonds as the basis for delimiting the persons chosen for government. The warrior-band members were rewarded with hereditary administrative positions. It must be emphasized, however, that despite kinship bonds, it was the loyalty of a man that determined whether his heirs received his fief.... These new vassals were required to renew pledges of allegiance to a ruler sometimes very remotely related. It must be borne in mind that kinship does play a part in political systems that range from feudalism to twentieth century Western democracy.

We cannot fail to observe that it was in regard to the society of the Chou period in China, one similar to that of the Mossi, that Coulborn was compelled to withhold judgment as to the nature of its political system. Shang society seemed to have had many of the tribal characteristics of the people found in the pre-Mossi Voltaic area. Chou had to face the problems of ancestor veneration associated with the tribal lands, and used some of the same techniques as the Mossi. Coulborn found many of these features "foreign to a tribal society" and finally decided to "leave open the decision as to whether Chou China developed a feudal system or a system of city states as its first enduring polity."[14]

In conclusion I shall say that the political system of the Mossi had definite feudal characteristics. These feudal characteristics did not come as a result of the breakdown of a pre-existing state, but served as techniques for building a state from small scattered groups. I should certainly like to keep open the whole question of feudalism, especially as it applies to the question of the origin of the pristine state, until more comparative data from Africa can shed additional light on this important subject.

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